



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Anarchism in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*

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### Abstract:

*The Secret Agent* is a novel by Joseph Conrad. It was published in 1907. The novel describes anarchic events in the life of a man named Verloc, a secret government agent for an unnamed country living in London in 1886, who is ordered to carry out a bombing with the goal of manipulating the British government. Though *The Secret Agent* is a work of fiction, its events and characters were partially inspired by an 1894 event in which a French bomb maker was killed in Greenwich Park, London, by an explosive device which prematurely detonated. The text is an expression of anarchism and modernist culture. The present paper, with a meticulous study, sheds significant light on the anarchism and modernist culture expressed through the text. MLA 8<sup>th</sup> edition has been used to cite references.

**Keywords:** cyborg, anarchism, modernist culture, machinery, robotic, anarchism etc.

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* published in 1907, dedicated to H. G. Wells, was written looking back at the Victorian period from the modernist period: a time of advanced technology and machinery but also a time of anxiety about their effect on society. The dedication to Wells implies that the novel will echo the angst surrounding technological and industrial progress that is found in works such as *The Time Machine* (1895) and predicts more anxiety to come, such as the use of the atomic bomb: arguably modernist anxiety's climax. In this sense, we can see Conrad as being, like Wells, 'a historian of the future'. The present paper proves and settles that, although Conrad "claims that his novel cannot be called 'political' because it does not engage with politics," (Berthoud, 104-105) it is, as it is critical of both anarchism and modernist culture: the Professor is symbolic of both, he is an independent anarchist and bomb-maker who provides Verloc with the explosives for the attempted Greenwich bombing. Despite his unimposing stature, he is both more confident and more dangerous than the other anarchists: he always carries an explosive detonator in his pocket, protecting him from the authorities, who are afraid to get too close. He is called The Professor

because he once served on a chemistry faculty. The Professor prides himself on his freedom from conventional moral categories.

### **Anarchism:**

It is a political philosophy and movement that is skeptical of authority and rejects all involuntary, coercive forms of hierarchy. Anarchism calls for the abolition of the state, which it holds to be undesirable, unnecessary, and harmful. It is usually described alongside libertarian Marxism as the libertarian wing (libertarian socialism) of the socialist movement and as having a historical association with anti-capitalism and socialism.

Furthermore, it is Conrad's portrayal of the Professor that most of all dramatises the conflict between humans and machines. Through considering the Professor as a prototype cyborg, a conflict of human and machine embodied as one being, I will discuss how conflict is dramatised through his appearance, mechanisms and mind. Analysing him as a machine in conflict with both the people of the modern world and his own human body will inform our understanding of human/machine relations circa 1907.

Mirroring the mechanically-aided self-destruction of Anarchist Martial Bourdin in 1894 in Greenwich, *The Secret Agent's* plot focuses on anarchists' plans to blow up the Greenwich Observatory thereby causing devastation which would exceed the expectations of the media. However, as "every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away... it must be purely destructive". (Conrad, SA, 2) Conrad's implication of this destruction as an imminent threat helps him to maintain his desired "story with an ironic intention but dramatic development." (Berthoud, 107) Drama is created more through the Professor and his relationship with bombs, particularly as Conrad's contemporaries would be aware that the technology of the Professor's mechanics would have improved since the Victorian period due to modernist "progress". However, in the novel, bombs are not yet as advanced as they could be. This is acknowledged by the Professor's desire to create a "perfect detonator" (SA, 86): it is sought-after and modernism will make it achievable.

The Professor can be identified as being part-machine and a prototype cyborg due to his appearance, his mentality and his mechanization which makes him capable of destruction: the thing with which he is fascinated, as shown by his toast "to the destruction of what is" (Conrad, SA, 249). All three of these elements dramatize the conflict between humans and machines both in the sense that there is ideological conflict between the Professor and all other characters in the novel and the potential physical conflict that would occur upon the Professor exploding. However, the wider message is not that the Professor is a threat, but that modernism is a threat as, considering its mass-production culture, it will continue to produce a range of negative by-products in order to make 'progress'.

The way the Professor physically connects with machinery is one reason for increasing tension. His aim to become a “perfect detonator” (Conrad, SA, 86) makes him a threat to society and illustrates the downside of scientific and technological progression. Samuel Thomas notes that by “fusing himself quite literally with this lethal device – a kind of proto-cybernetic mechanism – he transforms himself into a living weapon.” (Thamos, 435) Conrad puts the reference to weaponry at the forefront of shocking the reader to maintain a dramatic plot. However, one particular component of the Professor’s mechanical body, the camera shutter, offers greater insight into his character. Jacques Berthoud explains that the anarchists think that “the ‘colourless print of books’ ... has failed to make ‘it’s terrible and monotonous phrases’ ... real to us” (Berthoud,105) and so criticise the ready-made phrases of the press. I posit that the camera shutter’s metaphorical link to the detonator shows the desire to create the “images of disaster,” (Houen,35) which transcend the predictable media language and will result in the successful literal connection between the shutter and detonator.

The appearance of the Professor himself reinforces the idea of a mechanical man. His “iron-rimmed spectacles” (Conrad, SA, 249) add to the image of his body hosting mechanical parts. Interpreting the eyes as windows to the soul, the suggestion here is that the soul of the Professor is robotic: he is mechanical to the core and this is visible from his exterior. The Professor’s literal outlook is aided by a metallic object. His metaphoric outlook on issues such as life and death and his extreme political views, it emphasises, are alien to that of humans. He is said to show “dispassionate scorn” (Conrad, SA, 87), “perfect indifference” (Conrad, SA, 91) and an “impassive expression.” (Conrad, SA, 92) That such a radical thinker expressed so little emotion reinforces a sense of something that is mentally not human or, rather, no longer human. Instead, his robotic facial expressions suggest that he is void of emotions. The eerie notion that the machines of the modern world are dehumanising humans and controlling emotion appears to be Conrad’s suggestion and backs up the idea behind the newspaper criticism; particularly as newspapers are a product of mass printing machines.

Hence, the third way in which the Professor creates a dramatic conflict is by his mentality. His extreme anarchist views are, no doubt, Conrad using scare tactics as the Professor’s character is an exaggerated form of the Communists Conrad actually knew: Tanya Agathocleous states that these Communists have “more in common with Karl Marx...than with the misanthropic and suicidal Professor.” (Agathocleous, 11) The Professor is a radical amongst radicals and fully aware of the power he holds. His description of himself as “the force” (Conrad, SA, 248) makes reference to the previous description of him as “a force [whose] thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction” (Conrad, SA, 254), leaving no doubt as to the purpose of him opting to take on a mechanical form being to cause ruin. Drama is created here as there is little room to interpret the character as being mad and this is reinforced by the earlier sentiment that “perverse unreason has its own logical process.” (Conrad, SA, 33) Yet, this does allow us to interpret the Professor’s mind as

something which merely processes in a way which is mechanical. His own idea of being a radical amongst even the anarchists is shown by the idea that "they depend on life ... whereas I depend on death." (Conrad, SA, 85) The binary opposition reinforces his ideological isolation but also relates the way his mind works to the binary used by computer operating systems. The fact that, in this sense, his mind is more akin to a machine shows the conflict within the Professor. His physical mechanical attributes have affected his mind in such a way that he has become the machine: a prototype for the "perfect" (Conrad, SA, 86) cyborgian terrorist and a suggestion of what is to come. In addition, to maximise the fear, Conrad suggests that despite the Professor's robotic appearance, he is able to have "passed on unsuspected and deadly" (Conrad, SA, 254); a hidden danger.

To conclude, the character of the Professor is one who poses a threat to society but also represents the bigger danger posed by modern culture. The notion of a human body which has become a machine or, more specifically, a bomb and a mind that operates like a machine reflects the anxieties towards technology and industrialisation during a time of modernity, particularly regarding progress and its negative effects. Furthermore, Conrad's own attitude to anarchism further dramatises the events of the novel with the suggestion that in the crowds of the modernist city stands the threat of a cyborg, aided by modern machines: improved versions of the Professor produced on a mass scale. The novel deals intimately with terrorism and political unrest, and was published two years after an essay by Conrad, "Autocracy and War," in which he described Russia as a dangerous and destabilizing influence for democratic Europe. Though *The Secret Agent* was not well-received at the time of its publication, it is now considered one of Conrad's best works, with many deeming it prophetic in its anticipation of modern-day political concerns.

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